The Washington Post A23
The New York Times
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 28 OCT 1988

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Bush's Mission On Arms

A glint of a special arms control mission has appeared in George Bush's eye. It is chemical weaponry. The vice president says if he's elected president he'd like to be remembered for producing "a complete and total" international ban on the branch of arms that Winston Churchill called "that hellish poison."

Good. Chemical war may have started as a target of political opportunity for Bush, who got sent to Geneva to present an American proposal a few years back. It may be part of his way of slowing down on nuclear arms control. But chemical war remains a fine target—a loathsome activity worthy of presidential commitment. It's not everything, but it's not one of those multi-layered things reasonable people agree to disagree about either.

Bush supports a negotiated ban with good inspection, cooperation among industrial suppliers to prevent production, controls on missiles that can carry chemicals, research on defense against such missiles and censure of those who do this dirty thing. It's a conventional but intelligent program, and it should help in all but the hardest cases.

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The trouble is, of course, that only the hardest cases really matter.

Take Iraq. Lacking the West's cultural memory of gas in World War I, Iraq insists it has regarded gas simply as one more weapon, and not necessarily the worst. Its use of gas, however, combined with missile barrages against Iranian cities, sets an ominous example.

Iraq used chemicals repeatedly against Iranian forces, shook off repeated U.N. documentations and condemnations, and gained a military edge. Iraq then felt emboldened to punish its own rebellious Kurdish citizens—fighting, moreover, not for its life, when all restraints tend to be thrown off, but merely for marginal advantage. Other countries, potential combatants Syria and Israel among them, are now evidently picking up the pace of their chemical (and missile) preparations.

The United States criticized Iraq, but only criticized, and finally in a muffled voice. The scattered Kurds were not in a position to supply the hard evidence that Iran, a government, provided earlier when it was the victim. Without that information, the State Department had to climb down from its initial high outrage about the attacks on the Kurds. The usual clutter of other considerations asserted itself. In Congress, the call for sanctions was popular but shallow, and disappeared in a parliamentary scuffle.

Iraq has a part to play in other developments of American interest—Gulf security, regional politics, energy, trade, etc. This ensures a certain policy balance but works against high-voltage shocks, even worthy ones. It lets Washington keep its connection to Baghdad but lets Iraq get away with vague assurances that it won't gas Kurds anymore.

Enter Libya, an unambiguously authentic outlaw state whose cooperation in other matters Washington has long since written off. CIA Director William Webster has just flashed a bright spotlight on Libya's construction of a big chemical weapons production plant. But whether he has done more than advertise American anxiety and impotence is uncertain.

None of the items in the Reagan policy or the Bush program offers much promise of keeping a determined Libyan government from moving to production, deployment and use. It is enough to make one wonder whether President Reagan should have saved his air raid on Libya for the new chemical plant, or whether the Israelis will follow up their attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor—a deed widely condemned publicly and, in the end, widely applauded privately. Bush is a bit reserved on the subject; interestingly, Michael Dukakis talks in general terms of facing up to a requirement to preempt terrorist attacks.

All this is not to say there is no point in a workmanlike Bush-type chemical warfare program. Right now we are shocked and dismayed whenever the matter of someone's killer gas comes up, and we improvise, with the results painfully evident in Iraq and Libya. But expectations of responsible citizenship need to be cultivated. Governments should be held to a verifiable chemicals ban as the price of admission to international company. Politically, the worst thing would be if actual and would-be users of "that hellish poison" were no longer to be regarded as outlaws.